



China Perspectives

2009/2 | 2009

1989, a Watershed in Chinese History?

Editorial

China Perspectives 2009/2

Jean-Philippe Béja



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4795>

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2009

Number of pages: 2-3

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Jean-Philippe Béja, « Editorial », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2009/2 | 2009, Online since 01 June 2009, connection on 28 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4795>

This text was automatically generated on 28 October 2019.

© All rights reserved

Editorial

China Perspectives 2009/2

Jean-Philippe Béja

- 1 Speak the truth; never forget; seek justice; and call on conscience.” Twenty years after the June 4th Massacre, the Tiananmen Mother’s pledge has not penetrated the hearts and minds of the Chinese Communist Party leaders. On the contrary, almost immediately after they launched the PLA tanks on the Beijing students and residents who were asking for democracy and freedom, China’s leaders imposed a news blackout. The history textbooks hardly mention the event, and a search for the phrase “6.4” (June 4th in Chinese) on Chinese Internet search engines calls up only blank pages. When, at the beginning of this year, Zhang Shijun, a soldier who had taken part in the repression, asked Hu Jintao to reverse the official verdict on the event, he was arrested.
- 2 FThe largest spontaneous social movement in the history of the PRC has been erased from official history. However, every year at the approach of the fateful date, the authorities become nervous. Anniversaries, especially those of events that do not appear on official calendars, are often opportunities for the “masses” to express their discontent. When 303 intellectuals launched “Charter 08” in December 2008, the leaders remembered the collective letters by Fang Lizhi, Bei Dao, and other scholars, which in their requests for the release of Wei Jingsheng and a democratisation of the regime effectively launched the protests in early 1989. Determined to prevent a repetition of the events of 1989 at all costs, they decided to arrest Liu Xiaobo, one of the drafters of the Charter, in an attempt to discourage people from signing the document. It had the opposite effect, and to date more than 8,000 people have signed the Charter.
- 3 Twenty years after June 4th, Liu Xiaobo, who had tried to negotiate a peaceful evacuation of Tiananmen Square on the night of 3 June, is once again detained without charge at an unknown location. Democracy activists are harassed by the police and “asked” not to leave their homes on sensitive dates (such as 15 April, the anniversary of Hu Yaobang’s death). And while the international media will devote large amounts of space to the twentieth anniversary of the event on 4 June this year, China’s leaders will do all in their power to make it go unnoticed. The only place in the territory of the People’s Republic where it will be commemorated is the Special Administrative Region

of Hong Kong, where its impact on political development has been considerable (see Joseph Cheng's article).

- 4 Despite this attempt to erase public memory of the event, the June 4th Massacre had a huge impact on the evolution of the PRC. First, the pro-democracy movement was obliged to devise a complete change in strategy after the massacre. The intra-elite strategy, which had been successful in the 1980s, became impractical with the purging of reformists who had allowed pro-democracy forces to grow. Mass demonstrations were even more unthinkable once the Party leadership had shown it was prepared to impose the harshest repression to prevent any threat to its rule. It took many years to devise a new strategy, and to this day the movement remains quite weak (see the article by Béja and Goldman). Intellectuals, who had played an important role in the emergence of a semi-autonomous public sphere, have also been affected by the repression of the pro-democracy movement. Feng Chongyi shows that one consequence has been the development of liberalism and of the conviction that constitutionalism represents the solution to China's political problems among part of those who had taken part in the movement.
- 5 Since the events, Party leaders have been obsessed by the need to prevent the repetition of large-scale pro-democracy demonstrations. To achieve this goal, they have decided to combat liberalisation, which they believe can only lead to the collapse of Party rule. They have taken all possible steps to prevent the emergence of alternative political lines, whether inside or outside the Party (see Michel Bonnin's article). In particular, they have reinforced Party control over judicial organs to prevent victims of abuse from using the courts to vent their anger (see the article by Willy Lam). But of course, Party leaders understand that the massacre provoked a profound crisis of legitimacy, and they have had to find a new source of legitimacy to stay in power. Deng Xiaoping, drawing lessons from the collapse of the Soviet Union and aware that socialism was discredited, turned to the economy. In order to gain the support of citizens who had been shocked by his decision to crush the peaceful protest movement, Deng launched an authoritarian modernisation movement that aimed to improve the living standards of certain segments of the population, and achieve the old dream of Chinese elites since the Opium War: to make China a rich and powerful country. Barry Naughton shows that the June 4th Massacre was instrumental in the adoption of the strategy of economic development after 1992. This new strategy has been successful. The growth rates of the Chinese economy have been so impressive that the developed world has abandoned its post-June 4th condemnation of the regime to accommodate China's rise. In his article, Wu Guoguang shows that far from pushing towards democratisation, as common wisdom has it, the growth of China's economy has actually allowed the Communist Party to impose its values on the international community instead.
- 6 Twenty years after the 56 days that shook the world, the CCP is still in command of the country, the democracy movement is isolated from society, and China has become a great power respected by most Western countries. However, despite what appears to be an impressive success, the leadership remains nervous every year at the approach of sensitive anniversaries, and even more so this year. Whatever happens, as Perry Link emphasises, the memory of June 4th remains a ghost that haunts the leaders as well as the citizens of the People's Republic. China can't become a modern power until it has the courage to confront the reality of its recent past.

AUTHOR

JEAN-PHILIPPE BÉJA

Researcher Director at CNRS/CERI – Sciences Po and Researcher at the CEFC, Hong Kong.